

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

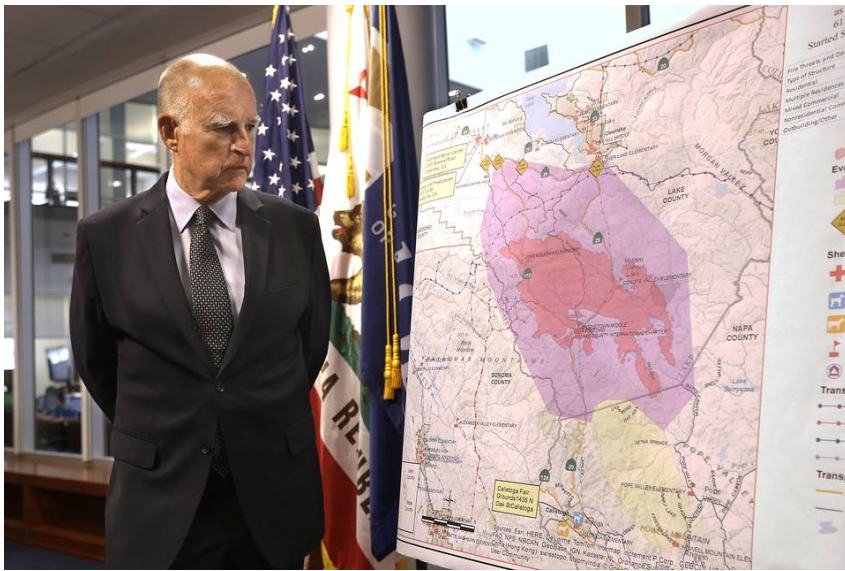
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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Carbon, Wind and Fire

California's wildfires undo Jerry Brown's anticarbon planning.



Gov. Jerry Brown studies a map showing the Valley Fire while getting an update on the California's fire situation at the Governor's Office of Emergency Services on Monday, Sept. 14, 2015. PHOTO: RICH PEDRONCELLI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Thousands of buildings and some 300,000 acres—10 times as much land as the city of San Francisco—have gone up in flames this week as three massive wildfires blazed across northern California. Tens of thousands of people have abandoned their homes, and Jerry Brown thinks he's found the villain: fossil fuels.

At a press conference on Monday, the Governor warned that the wildfires are a result and portent of cataclysmic climate change. "This is the future, from now on. It's going to get worse, just by the nature of how the climate's changing," Mr. Brown inveighed. "What we see in Europe now with mass migrations, that will happen in California . . . Central America and Mexico, as they warm, people are going to get on the move."

Europe's refugee crisis has been driven by turmoil in the Arab world and Western disengagement. In any case, Mr. Brown should be more worried about mass *emigration*

driven by California's anti-business climate.

One irony is that wildfires diminish the impact of California's anti-carbon policies.

In 2007 environmental scientists at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) and the University of Colorado at Boulder found that "a severe fire season lasting only one or two months can release as much carbon as the annual emissions from the entire transportation or energy sector of an individual state." NCAR's Christine Wiedinmyer estimated that southern California fires that burned for one week produced as much carbon dioxide as a quarter of the state's monthly fossil-fuel emissions.

According to a study this year led by the National Park Service and University of California, Berkeley, annual carbon releases from burning California wildland and forests—among the densest in the world—accounted for as much as 5% to 7% of statewide carbon emissions between 2001 and 2010.

This year's fast-burning fires are fueled by the historic drought and fanned by strong winds. But as with so many other crises in California, government policies bear much of the blame. To wit, federal policy of suppressing fires in national parks and on other protected lands for forest preservation.

"A century of fire suppression has contributed to a potentially unsustainable buildup of vegetation," explains UC Berkeley forest ecologist John Battles. "This buildup provides abundant fuel for fires that contribute to carbon emissions." University of Colorado researcher Jason Neff likewise notes that fire suppression policies have "had the unintended benefit of sequestering more carbon in our forests and reducing the impact of human combustion of fossil fuels."

One lesson here is that politically motivated policies intended to protect the environment often backfire—on the environment.

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